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ABSTRACT

A parent's incarceration significantly influences his or her children. Most incarcerated persons have little contact with their children, leading to negative consequences for the children. When incarcerated parents are freed, they often have a hard time reuniting the family, partly because they lack effective parenting skills. Parent training is frequently used to address the needs of parents and children who are at risk for family problems or for poor developmental outcomes. In a correctional setting, curriculum specifically designed for incarcerated persons can enhance parent training by addressing the unique needs of inmates. Several sets of curriculum materials for this purpose were reviewed, including literature-based and counseling approaches. Studies suggest that parent training is effective with incarcerated populations; thus best practice requires that institutions integrate parent training into their programs, using a variety of curriculum materials. Parent training should include information about children's needs throughout their developmental years. The goals of correctional parent training should encompass crime prevention for inmates and their children and the prevention of poor developmental outcomes for children. Future correctional parent training might include after-care components linking community corrections programs to facility-based programs during incarceration. (Contains 30 references.) (KC)

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Running head: PARENT TRAINING IN CORRECTIONS

Parent Training in Corrections: Mission, Methods, Materials, and Best Practices

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Abstract

A parent's incarceration represents a significant loss to children. This loss is exacerbated by parenting skill deficits experienced by inmate-parents. This paper reviews the rationale for Parent Training in correctional settings, evidence for the effectiveness of Parent Training and Parent Training methods and materials, including published curricula for direct instruction of parenting skills, literature-based approaches, and counseling groups for inmate-parents. Recommendations for best practices are discussed.

Parent Training in Corrections:
Mission, Methods, Materials, and Best Practices

The status of Parent Training in corrections represents a profound contradiction. As James Boudouris (1996) pointed out in his monograph Parents in Prisons: Addressing the Needs of Families, the tremendous increase in the U.S. population of incarcerated adults has led to a corresponding increase in the number of children who have incarcerated parents. In fact, as many as 250,000 children may have one or both parents in jail or prison in any one year (Harris, 1996). Half of all inmates have children (Courtier, 1995). Yet Parent Training, and parenting programs, in general, frequently confront institutional resistance from corrections professionals. This resistance can be formed as a question: Are families "legitimate clients," or "intruders" in correctional settings? (Courtier, 1995). Consequently, few correctional facilities emphasize developing or maintaining parent-child relationships through prison programming (Harris, 1996).

Inmates, who define the corrections client population, are members of families of origin, and those they may have created through becoming a parent. Even when founded families are only implied rather than realized through active involvement, a parent's incarceration significantly influences his or her children. The adverse impact of parental incarceration includes economic loss to families. A parent's incarceration can confer diminished, minority, status on family members, including children. For children of incarcerated parents, the psychological experience of parental loss can be more devastating than for other types of separation from parents. Children have more difficulty ascribing meaning to a parent's incarceration than to death or divorce for which the culture provides more guidance and models. A parent's incarceration can be interpreted as purposeful abandonment, leaving children to believe that they are unwanted by their parents (Koller & Castenos, 1970). In fact, children who interpret having an incarcerated parent as "the unwanted state" (Boudouris, 1996) may have correctly interpreted their place in their incarcerated

parent's criminal lifestyle and thinking. The psychological task of interpreting a parent's incarceration is complicated by patterns of deception that surround a parent's incarceration (Jorgensen, 1986): Children do not hear important truths about their parents. Typical of deception practiced by inmates and their families is the statement by an inmate to the author that, "I tell my child that I'm at the store buying candy for her." This young man's "trip to the store" has lasted 16 months--so far. Finally, surveys of inmate-parents find that they have little contact with their children. Lanier (1991), for example, found that 70% of inmate-parents in New York State averaged fewer than one contact with their children per month. Similarly, a survey of Kentucky women inmate-parents found that one third of the respondents had never been visited by their children (Showers, 1993). It is not surprising that children of inmates experience declines in school achievement, and higher rates of externalizing and criminal behavior than age-mates (Lanier, 1991). They experience profound feelings of "anger, frustration, abandonment and fear" (Harris, 1996, p. 32). The intergenerational cycle of crime appears to be mediated, in part, by the effects on children of parental incarceration, with children of incarcerated parents demonstrating greater frequency of juvenile crimes than age-mates, even when other factors, such as socioeconomic status, are considered (Harris, 1996). For males, the most significant risk factor for criminal behavior is having an incarcerated father (Courtier, 1995). For inmates themselves, there is research evidence that the probability of parole success increases when they take an active role in and, ideally, live with their families following their release (Boudouris, 1996; Holt & Miller, 1972; Showers, 1993). However, inmates face difficult obstacles to re-uniting with their families and children. Specifically, inmate-parents often lack the basic child-rearing skills necessary for success as principal caretakers of their own children. Inmate-parents frequently have experienced abusive, neglectful, or inadequate parenting models in their families of origin. Many became parents as teenagers. Upon release from prison, inmates frequently find that their children have more

significant behavior problems when they are re-united than when they lived with substitute caretakers (Harris, 1996; Showers, 1993). This must be all the more painful for the many inmate-parents who have unrealistically romanticized their bond with their children (Boudouris, 1996). Parent Training can facilitate meaningful contact between children and parents during incarceration, and can encourage successful reunions between released inmate-parents and children. In addition to the potential benefits, in terms of crime prevention, which may result from parenting programs, responsible parenting is deeply valued in our culture (although not always practiced or supported by this same culture). Teaching parenting is thus a legitimate component of the rehabilitation functions of jails and prisons.

Parent Training is frequently used to address the needs of parents and children who are at risk for family problems or for poor developmental outcomes. Parent Training classes and groups are highly valued by parents (Adams, 1996), and are actually preferred over individual therapies by some mental health consumers (Cunningham, Bremner, & Boyle, 1995). Parent Training in group settings not only imparts key information and trains parents in skills, but also serves, through the group process, to normalize parental concerns for participants, to provide a wide range of proposed solutions to problems, and to provide parents with a support network (Wierson & Forehand, 1994). Parent Training groups and classes extend services to parents cheaply (Cuningham et al. 1993; Wierson & Forehand, 1994; Wright, Stroud, & Keenan, 1993). Parent Training has been implemented in a variety of formats, including self-study using books and tapes (Feldman & Case, 1997), and classes lasting 10-20 weeks. Diverse populations have benefited from Parent Training, including parents with mental retardation, parents who abuse substances, and members of linguistic and ethnic minorities. Parent Training has demonstrated effectiveness in increasing parenting skills (Showers, 1993), parental self-efficacy (Gross, Fogg, & Tucker, 1995), parenting satisfaction and family relationships (Thompson, Ruma, Schumann, & Burke,

1996), and authoritative, confident parent-child communication (Middlemas, 1996). As well, Parent Training has been demonstrated to improve children's language development (Kaiser, Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fisc, 1996), study habits and pro-social behavior (Basu & Deb, 1996), risk of substance abuse (Aktan, Kumpfer, & Turner, 1996), and frequency and severity of problem behaviors (Thompson et al., 1996). Studies that have assessed generalization of gains across settings, and across time (i.e., maintenance of gains) have demonstrated that skills taught in Parent Training do, in fact, generalize from instructional to home settings and persist from 10 weeks to up to 18 months after parents complete training (Feldman & Case, 1997; Johnson, Walker, & Rodriguez, 1996; Kaiser et al., 1996; Middlemas, 1996). Evaluations of the effectiveness of Parent Training with incarcerated parents have demonstrated that Parent Training can increase inmate-parents' commitment to family life, and knowledge of child development (Caddle, 1993), and inmate-parents' institutional adjustment and parenting skills (Lanier & Fisher, 1990; Martin & Cotten, 1995; Showers, 1993).

Although there is a clear rationale for parenting programs in jails and prisons, correctional Parent Training is in its infancy. Although Parent Training opportunities can be found in some correctional settings, many adapt curricula that were designed for parents other than inmates. These curricula do not specifically address the special issues affecting inmates and their families, such as how to explain incarceration or how to have a productive visit or phone call. Further, it is difficult for inmate-parents to identify with materials that assume conventional middle-class family experience (Hairston, 1995).

Parent Training Curricula for Correctional Education

The use of curricula designed specifically for correctional settings can enhance Parent Training in jails and prisons by addressing the unique needs of inmates. Parent Training curricula that explicitly address the needs of inmates include Developing Prisoners' Parenting Skills

(Families in Crisis, 1992), and Parenting from a Distance (Walker, 1987). Developing Prisoners' Parenting Skills, as the name implies, focuses primarily on incarcerated parents. In contrast, Parenting from a Distance was created for correctional populations, but addresses parenting issues arising from separation from children by either incarceration or marital separation and divorce. Table 1 presents the topics covered in each curriculum. In reviewing the topics list, it is evident that the two curricula share common thematic elements: Both programs, for example, provide content aimed at increasing inmate/parents' understanding of, and empathy for, children's psychological needs. This includes, inevitably, children's need to cope with the pain of separation. Similarly, both programs address skills necessary to make visits, letters, and phone calls productive and valuable to inmates, their children, and caretakers. Examples of practical advice about phone calls include "Plan your conversations. . . . Prepare a closing. . . . Ask about school, sports and friends" (Families in Crisis, 1992, p.63), and "Establish a time to call. . . . Know topics to avoid. . . . Decide in advance how long you can talk" (Walker, 1987, p.60). As well, both programs provide appendices that include forms and handouts for program participants. Typical of these is Developing Parent's Parenting Skills' "The Going Home Technique Form," a worksheet which breaks the formidable task of transition from incarceration to community living into nine steps. A unique element of Parenting from a Distance is its emphasis on legal rights and responsibilities. Thus, a typical form from its appendix is a fill-in-the-blank letter to a school principal arranging for inmate-parent participation in educational decisions. Finally, both curricula provide references that document source material and provide leads to related books and articles.

Insert Table 1 about here

While the two curricula share many similarities, they have critical differences in their scope

and their organization. Developing Prisoners' Parenting Skills is an instructor's guide organized into six instructional units each intended to be taught in a single setting. The units address how to fulfill parenting roles while in prison and, additionally, more universal parenting skills, such as developing a parenting style, and creating and enforcing rules. Group leaders will find that each unit includes a highly explicit lesson plan. Each lesson plan includes unit goals, a list of required materials, and step-by-step instructions for teaching the unit. Activities for each session encompass the cognitive and affective domains of learning, and involve paper-and-pencil tasks, creative tasks such as drawing, guided discussion, and experiential tasks, such as physically destroying a paper listing negative parenting attributes inmates wish to "throw away." A clear advantage to Developing Prisoners' Parenting Skills is the depth of detail in its instructions for leading classes through each session. An instructor who wants and needs a high degree of structure can easily begin leading a Parent Training course by following the detailed procedures outlined in this program. Because the program requires only six sessions to complete, it is appropriate for both prisons, and jails with their more transient populations. Developing Prisoner's Parenting Skills is gender neutral and can be used with both mothers and fathers.

Parenting from a Distance includes a textbook and a separate Teacher's Manual and Review Key. As its name implies, this curriculum is less a complete parenting course than a course in how to maintain emotional contact and "positive involvement" during a separation from children. The textbook includes 10 chapters and is appropriate for use during a Parent Training program led by a teacher or by individual inmate-parents engaged in independent-study. Each chapter provides information and a review exercise. Review exercises include short answer and objective questions. The textbook is addressed to inmates directly, and is written in a conversational style. The prose is very blunt and direct; the lessons presented are unmistakable and inarguable. The book is 161 pages long, including exercises, references, and an index. It may intimidate inmates who are not

confident of their literacy skills. An emergent reader would certainly not be able to read the text. Conversely, inmates who have strong reading skills, who are motivated to work independently, or who do not tolerate the level of confrontation or self-disclosure inherent in group settings would find this text a good resource for independent study. The Teacher's Manual and Review Key is brief in comparison to either its companion textbook or to Developing Prisoners' Parenting Skills. Instructors using Parenting From a Distance need to apply a greater repertoire of teaching and planning skills than those who rely on the depth of detail incorporated in Developing Prisoners' Parenting Skills. Because it demands greater literacy skills of inmates and teaching skills of instructors, Parenting from a Distance may be most appropriate for experienced, confident instructors working with inmates who have better reading and writing skills. This curriculum is gender neutral.

Alternative Models: Literature-Based and Counseling Approaches

Literature-Based Approaches

An approach to Parent Training that addresses family literacy as well as parenting skills is exemplified by the MOTHEREAD/FATHEREAD and Brain Building Basics (Bodel, 1996) programs.

Although not specifically designed for corrections, Brain Building Basics is a literature based curriculum appropriate for use with inmate-parents. It is based on the underlying premise that parents, through the quality of nurturing and care they provide to their children, can help determine how children's brains develop. The program provides a primer--the "basics"--of the central nervous system's anatomy and function, information about child development, and parenting skills instruction through the guided study of children's literature. The program is composed of a manual and a reading list of 18 children's books. In each of the manual's four

chapters, the program introduces inmate-parents to children's books, provides comprehension questions for each book that emphasize understanding the needs, wants, and critical role parents play in the development of children, and lessons about parenting skills. The children's books are selected to present such themes as individuality, loss and grief, and gender identity. In addition to using children's literature as a medium for presenting information about children and parenting, Brain Building Basics provides direct, practical advice on a wide variety of parenting topics. This advice stresses parental responsibility for growing brains. Typical advice provided includes: Use jigsaw puzzles to stimulate thinking instead of educational television; prevent children from witnessing television or domestic violence; and recognize that babies can not be spoiled and should never be punished. Brain Building Basics' strengths lie in its emphasis on teaching principles of child development, and on the value it places on parental responsibility and efficacy. Both implicitly and explicitly, throughout the program, Brain Building Basics communicates that parents are powerful forces in their children's lives, and that they can help their children through their own efforts. A weakness of Brain Building Basics is that it is most useful for parents who fulfill an active care-giving role; it does not address coping with parental separation, or how inmate-parents can remain in contact with their children during incarceration. Brain Building Basics would therefore be most appropriate for use in pre-release classes for inmate-parents who are preparing to be re-united with children.

MOTHEREAD/FATHEREAD substantially differs from the other programs described. As opposed to curricula that are purchased in book or manual form, local MOTHEREAD/FATHEREAD programs are developed in collaboration with MOTHEREAD, Inc. which provides training and program development assistance in implementing their model. The MOTHEREAD model proposes that there are causal, reciprocal relationships among literacy, criminal and violent behavior, and family relationships. In this model, violent crime can function as

a form of interpersonal and social communication. This channel of communication may be used by individuals who lack effective language and interpersonal skills. By including inmate-parents in planning a literacy curriculum they then use in family reading, the MOTHEREAD model seeks to provide success experiences, link past and future behavioral choices, provide a social network committed to growth and responsibility, and provide specific skills in using oral and written language. Examples of oral language activities include having inmate-parents make audio-tapes of stories for their children. This activity exemplifies the multi-modal nature of MOTHEREAD's literature based approach of improving reading and comprehension of written language, speech and oral language, and affectional ties with family. Similarly, inmate-parents share books with children or partners. The themes of selected books provide vehicles for self-discovery as inmate-parents encounter narratives with special relevance to their own life stories. The MOTHEREAD model requires a commitment to receive training at one of the agency's training institutes, and to participate in collaborative curriculum development utilizing MOTHEREAD, Inc.'s consultants. The development of a local curriculum includes four steps beginning with a needs assessment carried out with focus groups. These groups include prospective participants. The needs assessment process results in a list of themes and topics that expresses the groups' consensus opinion of the concerns of the local site. A curriculum guide, including a literature list, is developed based on the topics list. Finally, MOTHEREAD staff field-test the curriculum materials with prospective participants and their children. MOTHEREAD programs have been implemented in both correctional and community settings. Four independent program evaluations of the MOTHEREAD model have examined program components. These evaluations indicate that MOTHEREAD programs can improve parent-child relationships, commitment to family literacy, parent's patience, discipline skills, and stress management skills. An evaluation of MOTHEREAD training concluded that it effectively prepares local instructors in the theory and practice of

implementing MOTHEREAD/FATHEREAD programs (Nancy Gaj, personal communication, January 26, 1998). Strengths of the MOTHEREAD program include its blend of a universal model with assessment of local needs. This permits programs to engage participants, and tailor local curriculum guides to address the needs of cultural or linguistic minorities, as well as the different needs of fathers and mothers.

Evaluations of literature-based programs indicate that the use of children's literature with incarcerated parents can improve inmate-parents' literacy as well as parenting skills. The unique contribution of children's literature to Parent Training appears to be its ability to raise consciousness of feelings and emotional themes experienced by inmate-parents, its ability to improve parent-child bonds, and its ability to increase empathy with children's emotional needs. Intergenerational reading, a supportive group process, and direct parenting skills instruction maximize gains for participants in literature based programs (Genisio, 1996; Gonzalez, 1994; Martin & Cotten, 1995; Owen & Zierman, 1995).

Parenting Counseling Groups

The decision to implement Parent Training implicitly assumes that poor parenting results from skill deficits. Since parenting skills can be acquired, it is implied that parents can improve their relationships with their children and how they carry out their parenting responsibilities by gaining new skills, including techniques (example: the use of praise), knowledge (example: infants are capable of emotion), and insight (example: lying about incarceration leaves children feeling betrayed, angry, and confused). However, skill deficits represent only one type of obstacle to successful parenting. Correctional populations include many individuals who demonstrate persistent patterns of thought, feeling, and perception that can prevent the acquisition of parenting skills, and improvement in how inmates fulfill parenting roles. Becoming better parents may, for some inmate-parents, require a therapeutic process that addresses personality development.

Examples of developmental barriers to parenting include thinking styles frequently attributed to inmates, such as grandiosity, irrational optimism, and a feeling of entitlement. Inmate-parents may have difficulty with intimacy with children and spouses or other custodial adults. They may not have the future orientation required to invest time and energy into parenting. Because inmate-parents are likely to have been raised by parents or other adults who were themselves narcissistic, pleasure oriented, abusive, or neglectful, they may have incorporated into their own personality structures parenting and gender ideals that inhibit forming relationships with children and co-parents. Regardless of their desire to improve as parents, inmate-parents may feel that they are ultimately unable to become better parents. They may have identified with parents or other caretakers with poorly controlled aggression, and thus may have difficulty accepting nurturing or collaborative parenting principles. Drug and alcohol abuse may limit inmate-parents' ability to employ new parenting skills. Finally, cultural influences, especially as the term culture applies to the effect on individuals of informal groups who share common criminal values of exploitation and hedonism, may represent barriers to using new skills. Consequently, parenting counseling groups that are essentially therapeutic may serve as an effective alternative to skills-based Parent Training instruction. Parent counseling groups would focus on personality change and development for inmate-parents who are less psychologically intact, while Parent Training classes may address the needs of more psychologically intact inmates.

Best Practices in Implementing Parent Training and Counseling

There is ample research evidence that inmate involvement in family life and child rearing benefits children of incarcerated adults, and is related to the post-release success of inmates themselves. As well, the effectiveness of Parent Training has been demonstrated with diverse populations, including inmates. Thus, the first best practice is for correctional institutions,

including state level agencies as well as individual facilities, to explicitly incorporate Parent Training into its rehabilitation function through the adoption of appropriate policies, procedures and program descriptions. At the facility level, where implementation occurs, programming should be based on an assessment of local needs that takes into consideration not only the numbers of inmates who are parents, but also their individual differences in personality development, ability, and skills. Evaluation of staff resources available to implement Parent Training should be included in any needs assessment. Choices of Parent Training modalities and curricula should span a continuum from self-study, to instruction in classes, to counseling groups, matching programs to inmate-parent characteristics, and to levels of staff availability and training. For example, if Parent Training instructors are relative beginners, the choice of curriculum should stress a high degree of structure provided to instructors and low demands for instructor planning. Confident, experienced teachers may be more comfortable with a flexible and demanding program. If inmate-parents targeted to receive Parent Training have low literacy skills, then the reading demands of a potential curriculum choice need to be carefully considered. Conversely, inmates who have well-developed literacy skills and are capable of independent study might benefit from curricula that are designed for self-study. Finally, Parent Training curricula used in corrections must address both the unique needs of incarcerated parents and their children, as well as universal needs shared by families with or without an incarcerated parent. Parent Training should include information about children's needs throughout the developmental period beginning with conception. The goals of correctional Parent Training should encompass crime prevention for inmates and their children, and the prevention of poor developmental outcomes for children. Finally, the future of correctional Parent Training might include after-care components linking community corrections programs to facility based programs during incarceration.

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Table 1

Parent Training Topics: Parenting from a Distance and Developing Prisoners' Parenting Skills

Topics	PFD[a]	DPPS[b]
Active Listening and Effective Communication		X
Children's Daily Routine	X	
Children's Developmental Stages		X
Children's Self-Esteem	X	X
Coping with Loss and Separation	X	X
Effective Discipline		X
Holidays and Special Occasions	X	X
Legal Systems and Parenting	X	
Maintaining Emotional Contact	X	X
Parenting Rights and Responsibilities	X	X
Parenting Styles		X
References and Suggested Reading	X	X
Relating to Mothers and Other Caregivers	X	X
Reuniting with Families	X	X
Time and Emotional Commitment	X	X
Understanding Misbehavior		X
Visits, Calls, and Letters	X	X

[a]Parenting from a Distance.

[b]Developing Prisoners' Parenting Skills.